

Black Bears in the Pickett State Park Area



Historically, black bears were found throughout the Cumberland Plateau. However, through habitat changes caused by human activity black bears were all but eliminated from their historic range.

In the mid 1990's 14 female black bear were released in the Big South Fork area. Captured in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the bears were fitted with radio collars and placed in remote areas of the Big South Fork. While not all bears stayed, many did establish home ranges in and around Big South Fork. Today, due to successful breeding and the in-migration of additional bear, population levels are increasing.

Bear Behavior and Biology

Black bears are secretive and shy creatures and are instinctively fearful of humans. Normally, they have no desire to interact with people. Bears are opportunistic feeders and will eat what is easily and readily available. Their primary foods are berries, acorns, fruits, grasses, and occasionally meat or carrion.

Adult black bear in the Pickett/ Big South Fork area weigh between 75-250 pounds. They vary in height when standing on their rear legs, but will rarely reach six feet tall. They are reclusive and prefer to be alone except during breeding season or when they have cubs.

Breeding takes place during the summer. Cubs are born during the following winter. This phenomenon is known as "delayed implantation." The female does not become pregnant until her body has gained enough weight to get her and the cubs through the winter. If the female is under stress or fails to gain enough body weight, the mother may reabsorb the embryos. The gestation period lasts about six weeks. The cubs are born in the den and are quite helpless for the first three months.

If You Meet a Bear

In the event that you see a bear in the backcountry, do not become alarmed. If the animal is foraging for natural food, simply stand as still and quiet as possible, and take advantage of a rare opportunity. Do not approach the bear, or throw food to the bear.

If however, the bear comes into your campsite, take a different approach. Any loud noise will most likely run the bear off, clanging pots and pans together, blowing a horn, and yelling would be appropriate actions. Do not allow the bear the opportunity to get your food. Should the bear become aggressive, or if it does not leave after your attempts, leave the area and report the incident to a Park employee immediately.

Black Bears have a keen sense of smell and in most cases will smell you long before you ever see it and will leave the area.

Food Storage

Bears that become habituated to human food are generally the ones that cause trouble. This occurs when humans leave food, food scraps, or garbage available to them. Instead of normally foraging for food, they learn to associate human scent with a food opportunity.

It is important that food is kept properly stored in backcountry sites as well as in developed campgrounds. This limits the human food opportunities available to bears and encourages them to forage naturally.



In the Backcountry

If camping in the backcountry, use the standard method of hanging your backpacks and food sacks. Find two trees approximately 30 feet apart with limbs 15—20 feet above the ground. Throw a rope across the limbs, and allow enough slack to attach your packs. Once the packs are secured to the rope, pull the rope tight and the pack should stabilize high enough where a bear cannot reach it. The packs should be in the center of the two trees in case the bear tries to climb the tree and reach for the packs.

Any food not in use should be stored in this manner while in the backcountry. Do not sleep in clothes that you have cooked in, as the food odor is left on your clothes and may attract a bear. It is also a good idea to cook some distance from your sleeping area. Plan your meals carefully so that you do not have excess food left over.

In Developed Areas

If camping near your vehicle or in a developed area such as a campground or cabin, place coolers, grills, cooking utensils, pet food, any food not in use, and anything with food odors inside a locked compartment of a vehicle or trailer. Wipe off picnic tables, grills, and discard aluminum foil used for cooking. Avoid burning garbage in fire rings because it will leave behind grease and food scraps. Always discard garbage in designated containers. Keep your campsite clean.

We want to prevent nuisance behavior by bears. By following these precautions we can hopefully prevent any bear from being killed or hit by a car. It will also prevent negative bear–human interactions. With your help we can keep the Pickett and Big South Fork bears wild. If you see a bear in Pickett State Park and Forest, we ask that you report the sighting or incident to the Park Office at 931-879-5821.